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AUTHOR D'Angelo, Dolores A.
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ABSTRACT

This study utilizes content analysis to compare and contrast the female protagonists in award-winning contemporary adolescent fiction. R. J. Havighurst's developmental tasks are discussed in reference to diverse female protagonists from approved school reading lists in Montgomery County, Maryland. Sara, from "Summer of the Swans" (Byars, 1970) and Dicey from "Dicey's Song" (Voight, 1982) are analyzed in attempt or achievement of these tasks. The study concludes that there is a lack of strong, positive female protagonists in adolescent literature. Because of the impact of reading on adolescents, teachers should incorporate more novels featuring strong female role models for reading by both males and females. (Three tables of data are included, and 17 refernces are attached.) (Author)

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ABSTRACT

The Female Character in Middle School Fiction:
Do Contemporary Adolescent Characters Reflect Realistic
Developmental Role Models?*

Dolores A. D'Angelo, Ph.D.
University of Maryland, College Park

Achieving or attempting to achieve the developmental tasks of adolescence is a common theme in standard literature for teenagers. This study utilizes content analysis to compare and contrast the female protagonists in award-winning contemporary adolescent fiction.

Havighurst's developmental tasks are discussed in reference to diverse female protagonists from approved school reading lists in Montgomery County, Maryland. Sara, from Summer of the Swans (Byars, 1970) and Dicey from Dicey's Song (Voight, 1982) are analyzed in attempt or achievement of these tasks.

It is concluded that there is a lack of strong, positive female protagonists in adolescent literature. Because of the impact of reading on adolescents, teachers should incorporate more novels featuring strong female role models for reading by both males and females.

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The Female Character in Middle School Fiction: Do Contemporary Adolescent Characters Reflect Realistic Developmental Role Models?

Dolores A. D'Angelo

I would like to discuss with you both traditional and diverse roles of the female protagonist in literature written for adolescents in the post World War II era. Much of the text of this paper is drawn from research done on award-winning realistic fiction for adolescents featuring female protagonists but it also applies to books in regular classroom use.

The influence of books on young readers is of particular concern to teachers. Louise Rosenblatt (1976) states that "through books, the reader may explore his own nature, become aware of potentialities for thought and feeling within himself, acquire clearer perspective and develop aims and a sense of direction" (p. v). Literature helps clarify the many ways in which humans deal with the varied possibilities of life. What young people read today has "definite effects" on their conduct tomorrow (Lorang, 1968). This makes the selection of books for classroom use of great importance. It has been stated that the act of reading may be one of the chief sources for experimenting with life or for realizing that others may encounter similar situations (Hanna, 1964). Adolescents who have the opportunity to read about strong, realistic characters are aided in their development of self. The act of reading about others with similar experiences allows internal role playing. This is an

important part of developing a sense of self, a major task of Robert Havighurst's developmental sequence. His series of ten tasks separates specific aspects of the adolescent experience in order of the usual chronological occurrence and complexity and will be discussed shortly.

Because literature is both a mirror and a creator of reality (Ferguson, 1973), the descriptions of the characters in these novels are of major importance for the adolescent reader. Adolescence is a process of character consolidation (Douvan, 1969); therefore, individuals undergoing these changes need realistic models and guidance. Adolescent girls need particular understanding because of a new awareness by females of their special identities and the changing expectations of the adults around them (Konopka, 1976). Because the novel has the greatest literary impact in the cultural education of young adults (Blau, 1970) and the age of the main character in relationship to the age of the reader is most significant in adolescent literature (Johnson, 1985), the characters and themes presented in this current literature have a major influence on the values and attitudes of teenage readers.

In order to determine this influence, content analysis was performed on ten novels in the study and was also used on the remaining books under discussion. These novels were coded in each of three episodes from the beginning, middle and conclusion of each book for attempt or achievement of Havighurst's ten developmental tasks. These developmental milestones were

modified to specifically describe the experiences of female protagonists (Table 1).

Each book was examined and coded in each of three episodes for presence/absence of attempt or achievement of each task. The ten tasks can be grouped in three sections: the establishment of autonomy (low level tasks, 1-3), psychosocial and psychosexual development (mid-level tasks, 4-7) and future orientation (high level tasks, 8-10). The ten tasks are:

1. achieving new and more mature relations with age-mates of both sexes (i.e., to learn to work with others for a common purpose, disregarding personal feelings. The most powerful single influence is the power of group approval);

2. achieving a feminine social role (i.e., to accept and learn a socially approved adult masculine or feminine social role. The girl must accept the idea of becoming a woman.);

3. accepting one's physique and using the body effectively (i.e., to become proud or at least tolerant of one's body, to use and protect one's body effectively and with personal satisfaction);

4. achieving emotional independence of parents and other adults (i.e., to develop affection for parents without dependence on them, to develop respect for older adults without dependence on them);

5. achieving assurance of economic independence (i.e., to feel able to make a living);

6. selecting and preparing for an occupation (i.e., to organize one's plans and energies in such a way to begin an orderly career);

7. preparing for marriage and family life (i.e., to develop a positive attitude toward family life and having children);

8. developing intellectual skills and concepts necessary for civic competence (i.e., to develop concepts of law, government, economics, politics, geography, human nature, and social institutions which fit the modern world);

9. desiring and achieving socially responsible behavior (i.e., to participate as a responsible adult in the life of the community, region and nation; to take account of the values of society in one's personal behavior); and

10. acquiring a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behavior (i.e., to form a set of values that are possible for realization; to develop a conscious purpose of realizing these values).

These tasks describe both the social context or lower level skills (i.e., developing peer relationships), practical or mid-level skills (i.e., economic independence and preparing for an occupation) and abstract philosophies of life or higher level skills (i.e., gaining values and ethics).

Important to this discussion and analysis of selected award winning novels is the application of these findings to the actual classroom situation. In Montgomery County, Maryland, the school system must address the needs of a diverse student body, made up

of a range of incomes and experiences as well as a variety of races and ethnic backgrounds. The reading lists for the middle schools and high schools reflect a concern for this diverse population and offer a range of novels appropriate for different reading levels and different age groups. Several choices in the required curricula feature strong female role models which have been analyzed in terms of developmental tasks.

The first book I would like to discuss is Summer of the Swans (Byars, 1970) (Table 2).

Set in a small West Virginia town, Summer of the Swans is the story of twenty-four hours in the life of fourteen-year-old Sara Godfrey. She lives with her nineteen-year-old sister Wanda and her ten-year-old retarded brother Charlie. They have been cared for by their Aunt Willie since their mother's death several years earlier. Their father, Sam, is a travelling salesman. That summer, Sara finds her life exceptionally difficult.

Six swans arrive at a nearby lake and Charlie slips out to see them one night after Sara takes him to see them in the afternoon. He becomes lost in the ravine on his way home and when he doesn't return the next morning, first his family and then many people from town go out looking for him. This crisis is a turning point for Sara. It affects how she feels about herself, her family, and her school acquaintance Joe Melby. She finds Charlie with Joe's help and everything takes on a different perspective. Joe asks her to a party, her absentee father calls and things begins to look bearable if not good.

The early emphasis in the novel is on primary adolescent tasks. Sara is concerned about peer relationships (#1) in her telephone talks with friends and her interactions with Joe Melby over an unpleasant incident with her little brother and his watch. She accepts her social role as a young girl (#2) through the protective care she extends to her brother, Charlie. Later in the novel, she relies on her own ingenuity and physical skills, and in particular her strength (#3), to reach Charlie in the ravine and rescue him.

Classified as an early adolescent, she does not demonstrate economic independence (#5) or preparation for an occupation (#6) but she does indicate an emotional independence from adults (#4) in the last episode when she continues her own search for her brother and finds him, based on clues she discovers and analyzes. She prepares for marriage and family life (#7) in the consistent care and comfort she provides for Charlie throughout the novel. Higher level tasks are also integrated into the later episodes. She develops intellectual skills (#8) when she analyzes Charlie's probable route and when she soothes him after he is found by telling him "it's only human to be scared." Her entire attitude toward her brother during the crisis and after demonstrates socially responsible behavior (#9). Her values and ethics are broadened (#10) when, despite her complaints about the situation, she realizes Charlie's helplessness and her own responsibilities toward him.

Sara is a character in transition, even in the brief time period covered by the novel. She is first seen in the novel as a somewhat narcissistic teenager who in the moment of crisis transcends her petulance and uses her own skills and ingenuity to solve the problem. At times she functions as a mother figure for her brother, while lacking one for herself. Her aunt and her older sister fulfill some mature female role model qualities but Sara seems to function better on her own. This independence, especially during the crisis situation, demonstrates a development in maturity for this character. She begins as a passive, stereotyped teenager and emerges as a clear-thinking, dependable person who is admirable in every way.

The second novel I would like to examine with you is Dicey's Song (Voight, 1982) (Table 3).

This novel is a continuation of the story of fourteen-year-old Dicey Tillerman and her brothers and sister from the earlier book by Cynthia Voight, Homecoming. Abandoned by their distraught, mentally ill mother in the previous book, the siblings had made their way to Crisfield, Maryland to be with their grandmother Abigail Tillerman, a crusty, caustic recluse whom the townspeople call bizarre. The book begins after the grandmother has accepted their arrival and while she is making plans to adopt them. The plot follows the difficulties in each child's life as each is affected by the loss of the mother and the adjustment to the new situation.

Dicey, as the primary female character, has her problems at home and at school. All of the family's struggles and triumphs are juxtaposed against the knowledge of the mother's catatonic state in a Boston hospital. The family's destiny comes to a turning point when the adoption papers are approved and soon after, Dicey and Gram must rush to Boston for the mother's impending death.

All of the developmental tasks described by Havighurst are attempted or achieved in the episodes selected for coding in this novel. Dicey develops mature relationships with peers (#1), such as her friend Jeff at school and her precocious younger brother James, whom she treats on equal terms. Her feminine social role (#2) is continuously developed as she cares for her younger siblings, not wanting to be a burden on Gram. She also helps Millie, a local merchant, at her store. At the conclusion, she takes on tragic tones as she sits by the hospital bed of her dying mother.

Dicey is initially unaware of her changing body (#3) until Gram suggests new clothes. She depends on her body's strength in helping clean and carry for Millie at the store and to bicycle several miles to school and home again. Through her job she also demonstrates emotional independence from adults (#4) when she prepares herself for a possible separation from Gram and cares for her family independently.

Throughout the novel, Dicey exhibits economic independence (#5) when she arranges for a part-time job at Millie's and gives

allowances from her earnings to her siblings. At the end, in a shop near the Boston hospital, she buys thoughtful Christmas gifts for her brothers and sister with her own money. In a similar manner, she prepares for an occupation (#6) by studying books on boat building and by obtaining for herself the part-time job. In that job she takes on more responsibilities as her duties expand from cleaning to bookkeeping and ordering for Millie.

In her role as mother-substitute for her younger siblings, Dicey is continually preparing for marriage and family life (#7). She intervenes in school situations, plans meals and tutors her younger sister. As she uses her practical skills, Dicey is also developing higher level skills. She is continually developing her intellectual skills (#8) as she emphasizes the importance of the family structure early in the novel, investigates her poor school marks later on and discusses human nature with a woodcutter in Boston at the end. She shows a desire for social responsibility (#9) when she asks to go to her sister's school conference and when she realizes Millie's shortcomings and deals carefully and thoughtfully with her. Dicey's values and ethics (#10) are continually developed as she thinks about her family's future and, after an analysis of Gram's, clarifies her own philosophy of life. She often thinks about Gram's life and wants her siblings to establish happy patterns for theirs. She realizes the value of family in the end and views her mother's death with resignation. Dicey is a fully developed character. She is

realistically depicted as a young girl who copes with unusual difficulties and faces them with humor, insight and a great deal of selfless concern for her family. She deals with problems ranging from her own changing body, to her siblings' school problems, to her mother's death and meets each challenge with determination. Dicey is always aware of her options and makes reasonable, careful choices. She is not perfect but she is an excellent role model as a non-stereotyped contemporary young woman.

These novels, in addition to Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, by Mildred Taylor, The Great Gilly Hopkins, by Katherine Paterson, Snowbound by Harry Mazer (where the leadership role is shared equally by a male and a female character), and Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O'Dell as well as others, are indicative of the novels introduced in the middle school curriculum to balance the traditional offerings with novels featuring female characters. These are protagonists of varying races and backgrounds that younger adolescents can identify with and use as role models.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that the impact of reading on the adolescent is a crucial one because literature deals with a wide range of opportunities and choices from which an adolescent must create her own personal philosophy. Raising questions about books read enables teachers to foster greater reader understanding and to encourage more significant interpretations. Researchers believe that books play an

important part in an adolescent's readiness to affirm her autonomy, an important developmental task (Lenz and Mahood, 1980).

It is my hope that in the coming decade, teachers will incorporate more of these novels featuring strong female role models in their classrooms for reading by both males and females because storytellers in any cultural background or genre are the indispensable agents of socialization (Riesman, 1950). The stories told through literature help facilitate the passage through the adolescent period of life.

Table 1

Sample Coding Sheet Used for Determining Presence/Absence of Havighurst's Development Tasks (Modified) as Demonstrated by the Primary Female Characters in each Novel

Task	Episode 1	2	3
1. relationships with peers			
2. achieving a feminine social role			
3. accepting and using the body			
4. achieving emotional independence of parents and adults			
5. achieving economic independence			
6. selecting and preparing for an occupation			
7. preparing for marriage and family life			
8. developing intellectual skills			
9. desiring socially responsible behavior			
10. gaining values and ethics			

Table 2

Presence/absence* of Havighurst's developmental tasks (modified) in: Summer of the Swans (Byars)

Task:		Episode 1	Episode 2	Episode 3
1.	relationships with peers	X	X	X
2.	achieving a feminine social role	X	0	0
3.	accepting and using the body	0	0	X
4.	achieving emotional independence of parents and adults	0	0	X
5.	achieving economic independence	0	0	0
6.	selecting and preparing for an occupation	0	0	0
7.	preparing for marriage and family life	X	0	X
8.	developing intellectual skills	0	0	X
9.	desiring socially responsible behavior	0	X	X
10.	gaining values and ethics	0	X	X

*Key: X = Presence of attempt or achievement of task

0 = absence of attempt or achievement of task

Table 3

Presence/absence* of Havighurst's developmental tasks (modified) in: Dicey's Song (Voight)

Task	Episode 1	Episode 2	Episode 3
1. relationships with peers	X	X	0
2. achieving a feminine social role	X	X	X
3. accepting and using the body	X	X	0
4. achieving emotional independence of parents and adults	X	X	X
5. achieving economic independence	0	X	X
6. selecting and preparing for an occupation	X	X	0
7. preparing for marriage and family life	X	X	0
8. developing intellectual skills	X	X	X
9. desiring socially responsible behavior	X	X	X
10. gaining values and ethics	X	X	X

*Key: X = Presence of attempt or achievement of task

0 = absence of attempt or achievement of task

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